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LINES OF RELIGIOUS
INQUIRY

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Lines of Religious Inquiry

An Address Delivered to the Unitarian Club of Toronto

By

GOLDWIN SMITH

TORONTO
William Tyrrell & Company
1904.

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Lines of Religious Inquiry

AN ADDRESS DELIVERED TO THE UNITARIAN CLUB OF TORONTO

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Lines of Religious Inquiry.

OURS is an age of great perplexity and doubt on questions vitally affecting the highest interests and the destiny of Man.

The first condition of finding truth is that we should honestly and fearlessly seek it. For this we have no other instrument than our reason, for the weakness of which we are not responsible, for its faithful use we are. "I express myself with caution," says Bishop Butler, "lest I should be mistaken to vilify reason, which is indeed the only faculty we have to judge concerning anything, even Revelation itself, or be misunderstood to assert that a supposed Revelation cannot be proved false from internal characters." Noble words those for a Prelate of the State Church. Whether a Revelation is authentic, whether a miracle is real, reason must be judge. If calmly, carefully, and conscientiously applied, it still misleads us, on its Giver the responsibility rests. Our only path of salvation is thorough-going loyalty to truth. If there is a God, He is more magnanimous and equitable than the most magnanimous and equit-

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able of men. To such a Being it can matter little whether his creatures find truth. It may matter much to him whether they seek it.

At the same time we have need of caution. Materialism, as well as orthodoxy, may have its fanatics. Is not a touch of fanaticism perceptible in such a materialist as Haeckel? Few, probably, now doubt the general truth of Darwin's grand discovery. But some of us seem to have run, one might almost say, Evolution mad. We are told in effect that Deity itself is subject to the law of evolution, and has conformed to it in its revelation of itself to mankind, going through a necessary stage of primitive and barbarous morality before it could come to the era of moral light. Of the general truth of Evolution, I repeat, there can be no doubt. But the discovery is new, and its exact bounds may not yet have been fixed. There may yet be room for belief in a directive and creative power, as Lord Kelvin and other great men of science hold. Evolution, it appears, works by the improvement through environment and circumstance of accidental variations. An evolutionist was asked how many aeons it would probably take to evolve by this process a bird which should build a nest in anticipation of laying an egg. He was not at once ready with a reply. At last he said that some allowance must be made for the habit of imitation. This would in the first place imply the previous existence of a thing to be imitated. In the second place, to evolve

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the habit of imitation, another vast series of aeons would apparently be required.

Reverence, again, is needful probably in seeking truth, certainly in imparting it, especially to unwilling minds. I once heard Ingersoll. His brilliancy was unquestionable, and his fearlessness in attacking superstition commanded respect. But his travesty of Christianity was unfair and repulsive even to the sober free thinker, much more to all who still clung to their ancestral faith. In an anti-clerical book store in Paris I found a comic Life of Christ, the effect of which would be to drive the reader who had not parted with reverence back into the arms of any decent superstition. In the day of Voltaire, when intolerance was still mighty and murderous, satire and mockery might be the only safe and effective missionaries of free thought. Now all is changed. Thought and utterance are free, or have nothing worse to encounter than prejudice and hard words. In my youth geology was nervously striving to accommodate itself to Genesis. Now it is Genesis that is striving to accommodate itself to geology.

We who are met here this evening have probably all of us fully and frankly accepted the revelations both of science and criticism. We have bidden farewell to the supernatural, the mythical, the dogmatic. If we still follow Jesus of Nazareth it is because His words are true, and being true are bread of moral life. If we believe in His divinity,

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it is because spiritual perfection is divine. At the same time we do not forget that all this belief in the supernatural, this myth, this dogma, these Athanasian Creeds, the decrees of polemical councils and ecclesiastical incrustations of all kinds have been accepted and cherished by men of the highest and most beneficent character, not only in the pulpit or the cloister, but in all the walks of life. When criticism has done all that it can do, the historic fact remains that belief in the fatherhood of God and the brotherhood of man, which is the real essence of Christianity, has for eighteen centuries been the soul of moral civilization. Overlaid and compromised as it has been by the sinister union of the Church with the State, and by the crimes of Emperors, Popes, Catholic Kings, Tudor despots, and intolerant Presbyteries, disgraced as it has been by fanaticism and imposture, Christianity, where it has had fair play, seems to have proved itself by its fruits to be a true solution of the ethical problem of humanity.

What is religion itself, and what does it indicate? It seems to be, if not absolutely universal, common to all except the very lowest races, which may be degenerate, and in that sense apparently congenital. It is also, so far as can be discerned, peculiar to the nature of man. Far-fetched, surely, is the idea that its rudiment is found in the feeling of a dog toward its master. Various origins of religion have been devised. A general and natural opinion

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is that it was kindled in the heart of man by the sight of the great objects and the influence of the great powers of nature. Some have held it to be the offspring of dreams of departed chiefs. Feelings of admiration and awe are kindled not only in the savage but in the civilized man by the sight of the sun in his glory, and of the star-lit night, by the solemn silence of the primeval forest, by the peal of the thunder and the voice of the storm. But the question remains whether the religious sentiment is created by these influences, or whether being in man it is evoked by them, and fixes on them as material objects of its worship. At all events, the religious sentiment exists and manifests itself. It appears to be tenacious of life, for even a philosopher who discards belief in a personal deity cherishes for the power which moves the universe a sentiment different from any produced by the notion of mere power.

Man, Darwin has proved, was evolved from a lower animal type; it may be from the worm. Still, having been evolved, he is not a worm but man. Did we not know before that he had been developed out of a senseless embryo? Was not the old belief that he had been made out of the dust? We are what we are, whatever our genesis may have been.

There seem to be in our nature things for which material evolution will not account; things which are not of the earth or of the earth-worm, and

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which therefore we may distinguish as spiritual until a material account of them appears.

There is our will; I do not say free will, because that term involves us at once in mazes of logomachy; but will, *i.e.*, power of choice. What is the exact relation of will to antecedent and environment is a problem which probably defies solution. That we do will; that we have liberty of choice; that our actions do not follow antecedents in merely material sequence like a ball propelled by impact, is a fact of consciousness assumed in all our judgments on our own actions and on those of others. If our nature lies to us in this, in what can its evidence be trusted? Of course, if the Necessarian chooses to say that all our actions were pre-ordained in the cosmogonic nebula he cannot be gainsaid. Necessarianism seems to me nothing more than a puzzle created by the difficulty of expressing the exact relation of the antecedents to the volition. Achilles does overtake the tortoise, in spite of the sophistical demonstration to the contrary. In spite of the perplexing demonstration of Jonathan Edwards, we do will.

Then there is moral aspiration. The élite of the race at all events aspire to the formation of a character such as shall fulfil a moral ideal, to which apparently nothing in material evolution or in the influences of material existence points. An absurd theory has been put forth maintaining that man had advanced by acting against his reason.

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Reason, of course, includes all the intellectual antecedents of action, and a man, though he may act against his apparent interest, can no more act against his reason than he can jump out of his skin. But men do act against their apparent interest for the attainment of a moral ideal, and it is difficult to trace their so doing to any law of material evolution.

Again, there is idealization, the power and habit of imagining states of being far different from those in which we are and far superior to it, specially characteristic of poets, authors of Utopian visions, and all imaginative writers. Art generally is idealization. We see no germ of it in brutes; nor in its origin or development does it appear to be material.

In the same category may perhaps be placed love of the higher and purer kind, that love which transcends mere sexual desire such as we undoubtedly share with the brutes, that which inspires noble action and is the light of domestic life.

We will be heartily loyal to physical science. We will accept all its demonstrations, however they may clash with our prepossessions, however humbling they may be to humanity. But we crave consideration for all real phenomena whether they may seem to fall within the realm of physical science or not.

Suppose the origin of life to be discovered and found to be in matter, as Tyndall said the poten-

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tiality of all things was; what difference in our view of our actual being or of our probable destiny would that discovery make? Tyndall was one of my greatest friends. He insisted on being called a materialist, but a man who was less materialist in his sentiments and aspirations never lived.

Far more formidable and depressing to my mind than anything concerning the origin of the human frame are the objections raised by materialism to belief in the existence of order, design, providence in the government of the universe. Materialists point with terrible force to volcanoes, earthquakes, deluges, storms, deadly visitations of all kinds, towers of Siloam constantly falling on the just as well as on the unjust; to the geological records of whole races of animals brought into existence apparently only to perish; to the enormous waste of life attended by boundless suffering which is caused by the over-multiplication of many species; to the devastation and torture incident to the relations of species with each other, notably to those of the carnivora with the species on which they prey. Looking abroad to the stellar universe they bid us mark irregularities suggestive of chance, waste of matter in apparently uninhabitable worlds, errant comets and meteorites, wrecks such as that of the Nova Persei. They bid us mark the ultimate tendency of this planet of ours with all that it contains and the fruit of all our efforts to a physical catastrophe.

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On the other hand there is the beneficence of nature; there is the glory of the universe to which our souls respond; there is beauty; there is a power of good everywhere struggling with evil. The other worlds may not be habitable for beings like ourselves. It does not follow that they are untenanted and that the universe is a boundless waste. We on this planet have reason and discourse. Is it likely that they are the accidental products of one solitary globe and that all is senseless and mute elsewhere?

The most extreme physicists recognize law, and habitually employ that term. It would be unfair perhaps to pin them to a phrase; but law seems to imply a law giver.

The universe altogether is, and must apparently remain, a mystery to us. We can form no conception of infinity or eternity. They are negative terms expressing the limit of our mental power. The materialistic hypothesis is unthinkable. It postulates at the commencement of all things the action of forces unoriginated and with nothing to set them in operation. Even of the visible universe we know only what our bodily senses tell us; and what assurance have we that the evidence of our bodily senses is complete? The purblind mole no doubt believes in the completeness of its vision. We may be in a universe totally different from that which meets our eyes, even when they are aided by all the instruments and calculations of science.

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In the stellar universe we see or seem to see disorder and absence of design. In human nature we see implanted evil and destructive passions by which terrible havoc has been made. This again staggers our faith. We are in fact brought back to that unfathomable mystery, the origin of evil. We can only say that good struggles with evil, and so far as the inhabitants of our planet are concerned, seems on the whole gradually to prevail. One key, or hint of a key, we perhaps have. We can form no notion of any moral excellence which is not the result of effort. If we try to picture to ourselves a seraph created perfect and incapable of falling, mere insipidity is the result. Thus, from one point of view, evil appears to be, as it were, the indispensable trainer of good.

Let us remember that, after all, science itself is still in progress. There may yet be further secrets to be revealed. There may be other Darwins after Darwin.

Meanwhile we have in ourselves a rule of life and an ideal of character, the product of our nature and the social influences under which we live. By following that rule and working up to that ideal, unless our nature lies to us, we shall do well.

Finally comes the question whether there is a future state, momentous to all, most momentous to those who have come to the end of the present life. Bishop Butler speaks of belief in a future life as "the foundation of all our hopes and of all our fears

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—all our hopes and fears which are of any consideration." This is saying too much. If we were assured that this life were all, we should still desire to pass through it as easily and pleasantly as possible, in good fellowship with the companions of our brief journey and in the enjoyment of affection. But there is surely no question in which we have an equally deep interest. Our interest is social as well as personal. For there can be no doubt that social as well as personal morality has been largely upheld by conscience, which is a religious monitor, appealing from earthly tribunals to a divine judgment and holding out as its sanction the prospect of rewards and penalties beyond the grave. Cancel the authority of conscience, and wickedness will have no control, except opinion, which it disregards, and the penalties of the law, which it may evade. Cancel the authority of conscience, and the martyr apparently is a fool.

The Positivist undertakes to console us by the promise of a subjective immortality which we are to enjoy as particles in the great being of humanity, sharing the progress of the race and forwarding it in our day. But that which is not personal and of which we are not to be conscious is not ours. Formularies of this kind have no practical force or value. They will not console us for loss of this "sensible, warm being" or for eternal separation from those we love. They will not transform sufferings into blessings or cancel all the horrors of

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history. They will not compensate the slave for whom a life of enforced toil and misery has ended in a cruel death. They will hardly make self-sacrifice rational. Besides, after all, the end of progress and of the great being of humanity is to be a physical catastrophe, in which the fruits of the effort and self-sacrifice are to be lost. I am not here discussing the Positive philosophy. It is the work of powerful and earnest thinkers. But it presents itself as an induction from history, and history is not ripe for an induction; it is not complete and we know not how far from completion it may be. Comtism seems to me to lack a warrant for its finality.

Of positive proof such as would be afforded by the return of one from the dead we have none. All the stories of ghosts and apparitions are mere tales for a Christmas fire-side. Such of them as had any show of credibility have been explained. A ludicrous part of them is that the soul always appears in the form of the body, and generally with clothes. Spiritualism and its fatuous planchette have been thoroughly and repeatedly exposed. Its spirits have to materialize, in other words have to cease to be spirits before their presence can be perceived. People have been made credulous by their longing for intercourse with lost objects of affection. This is the only feature of spiritualism worthy of any respect.

The immortality of the soul, that is, its natural immortality, is a Socratic, not a Christian, doctrine.

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Socrates, before he drinks the hemlock, tries to prove to his sorrowing disciples that he is about, not to die, but to enter into a higher state of existence. He assumes what we know to be untrue, that the soul is a being distinct from the body, pent within the body during life and set free from it at death. He points to the distinction between the lyre and the melody. But one of his disciples reminds him that when the lyre is broken the melody dies. Socrates assumes the previous existence as well as the immortality of the soul, and finds the evidence of that pre-existence in his doctrine of innate ideas.

The Christian idea is not the natural immortality of the soul and its release from the body at death, but the resurrection of the body. Lazarus is raised, and Jesus rises, bodily from the dead.

Bishop Butler in his elaborate essay on a future life assumes like Socrates the separate existence of the soul, and argues that, it being so far as we know indiscerptible, we have no reason to believe that it will share the dissolution of the body. But we know now that what we call the soul, that is our personality, is not a being distinct from the body, but the outcome of our whole frame, the dissolution of which it will presumably share.

That death ends all and when a man comes to die it signifies nothing whether his life has been good or wicked, whether he has been a benefactor or a scourge to his kind, is a belief from which

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our whole nature recoils, and this perhaps is the strongest evidence that we really have of the probability of a future state. Certainly, if the power which rules the world is just and omnipotent, there must be a life beyond the grave; for who, looking to the vast inequalities of the human lot, to all the unearned prosperity and the unmerited misery of which the world is full and which history records, can say that justice is done here? Promised, it may be, and there may be a certain instalment of performance. That it is fully or anything like fully performed nobody but an enthusiastic optimist can maintain.

To the objections raised by the cases of infants, savages, idiots, beings who have never seen the light of morality, there is at present no answer. Orthodoxy has none any more than the free inquirer. The theory of immortality by natural selection of the élite of the race which has been broached, may be ingenious but is totally incapable of verification.

We have at all events got rid of the Dantean Purgatory and Hell. Dante is a great poet, but it is difficult to forgive him for having painted God as the creator and keeper of a torture-house immeasurably more cruel than that of the worst of Italian tyrants. Less unwelcome than purgatory and hell, at all events, is the thought of being reabsorbed into the general frame of nature, blooming perhaps in the flower or waving in the tree.

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We need not go on adding to the sadness of death the hideous pomp of the funeral.

If the belief in a future state should depart, as it certainly appears to be departing, the consequence will naturally be, in fact is already being, increased care for the prolongation and enjoyment of this life. Probably there will be a more intense struggle for the goods of the present world ,attended very likely with a conflict of classes and a disturbance of the social order. Lazarus will no longer be satisfied with the promise of another world. Men will continue perhaps to sacrifice themselves for the objects of their personal love, but hardly for the community and much less for mankind.

I did not undertake, in opening, to solve the great questions, but only to point out what they were and the general lines of argument about each of them, as well as the spirit in which we should approach them all. That has been the purport of my address. My first word will be my last; there is no salvation for us but in the fearless, cautious, reverent pursuit of truth.

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Appendix.

DOES CHRISTIANITY FALL WITH DOGMA?

To the Editor of The New York Sun—Sir: It seems to be assumed in some quarters that if ecclesiastical dogma departs, nothing of Christianity will be left us. The edifice of ecclesiastical dogma is built on belief in the Incarnation and Atonement, which again depends on belief in the Fall of Man. Science has apparently disproved the Fall of Man, and proved that man, instead of falling, rose by evolution from lower organizations. The inference seems irrisistible and fatal to dogmatic Christianity. But does this reduce Christianity to "an ethical speculation," one of a number of the same kind?

The essence of Christianity as it came from the lips of its author seems to be belief in the fatherhood of God and the brotherhood of man. Trace the practical effect of this belief through the centuries, disengaging it as well as you can from ecclesiastical superfetations, from the effects of fellowship with evil powers of the world, from the crimes of the Papacy, and from the fanaticism of sects. Does it not appear wherever it has prevailed, under whatever form and in whatever circumstances, in all nations and in all states of life, to

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have produced in those who strove to live up to it, excellence and beneficence of character, with spiritual happiness and inward assurance that it would be well for them in the sum of things. In that case may not Christianity fairly present itself as something more than an ethical speculation? May it not claim to rank in some degree as a right solution of the problem of humanity and a practical experiment which has not failed?

It is said that in this struggle of righteousness and mercy against the powers of injustice and violence suddenly unchained, those who have borne themselves best upon the side of that which Christians claim as Christian principle, have in many cases not been Christians. This is true, as it is true that some of the Christian churches have taken that which seems to be ethically the anti-Christian side. But have these men, in discarding Christian profession, discarded belief in that which is the essence of Christianity? Have they renounced belief in the brotherhood of man? May it not be said that Comte's Great Being of Humanity is Christ's brotherhood of man under another name? Belief in God may have been renounced, yet to consecrate belief in a brotherhood of man there must surely be some consecrating power.

As an indication that Christianity cannot stand as a philosophy of the conduct of life without the support of dogma, you cite the extreme passages in the Gospel against carefulness for riches

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and the things of this world generally, observing that "so far from there being practical unanimity in accepting this philosophy of the conduct of life, there is practically unanimity in repudiating it." Beyond doubt the passages are in expression hyperbolical. They are the language, as those who have rejected supernaturalism believe, of a peasant reformer who spoke to the heart rather than to the philosophic mind, who had been bred in no school of thought and was untrained to the exact use of language. Beyond doubt their hyperbolical character has told against their practical effect. But after all, the gist of them is "keep your heart above wealth and devotion to its increase." Has not this been practised, without detriment to industry, by men even in the mart or on the Stock Exchange, and have they not found that self-approval and moral happiness were the result?

It was rather surprising to hear a doubt expressed, as it was the other day by a scientific man, regarding the effect of the progress of science on our happiness. As to the effect of scientific discovery on our material well-being and everything that directly depends on it there can be no doubt whatever, though querulous old age may sometimes be found looking back wistfully to the restfulness of the days before the electric telegraph, the ocean greyhound, and the automobile. Nor, if it is the effect of scientific discovery on our religious faith that is meant, can there be any doubt that know-

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ledge of our nature and destiny, however unwelcome and humbling in itself, is better than ignorance and infinitely better than falsehood. Let science prove that man is merely a physical development of the ape or earthworm, and that with his present life all ends; we will accept the proof; though there may be little comfort in the materialist's exhortation to make the best of this life and look forward with complacency to our eternal sleep, the life perhaps being that of a galley-slave, while eternal sleep is a pleasant name for annihilation. But the conviction cannot be said to enhance the dignity or conduce to the happiness of man; apparently it will hardly conduce to morality, personal or social. Before accepting it, we crave a full examination of all the phenomena, including those which do not seem as yet to have been clearly brought under the domain of physical science. Physical science itself is still advancing. To its advance no end appears. Nor, we must be permitted to say, is the materialist more proof than the spiritualist against natural bias. When a materialist, in face apparently of his own consciousness and universal experience, denies the existence of human volition, we cannot help thinking that there is ground for reconsideration, perhaps even of other portions of his case.

GOLDWIN SMITH.

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